SESSION 2
THE CHALLENGE OF SOCIALIST REALISM

Last week we surveyed the state of politics and of music in Russia in the year 1917. Today we look into the policy of Socialist Realism as it was applied to music.

PRELUDE
As a prelude to today’s discussion we’re going to hear one of the most popular and highly praised works of Soviet Realism, Dmitri Kabalevsky’s Violin Concerto of 1948. Like other Kabalevsky pieces, this music is direct and accessible, optimistic in mood, and immediately appealing to listeners then and now. You can expect to hear familiar rhythms, traditional harmonies (with just a smattering of dissonance), and simple, singable melodies. Composed with young virtuosi in mind, this concerto requires technical brilliance by the soloist, rather than depth of feeling. It was awarded the Stalin Prize in 1949 - the first of four Stalin Prizes to be awarded to Kabalevsky’s compositions. It is played here by the brilliant young Chinese violinist, Leung Kin Fung, with the orchestra part played on the piano.

DISCUSS WITH “SHOULD BE” SLIDE
By contrasting it with Stravinsky’s “Renard,” written 30 years earlier, you can immediately understand the dramatically different direction that Soviet music took from the music of Western nations. The cause of this different direction may be found in the policies of the Soviet government.

POWER, POLITICS, AND THE ARTS
For us Americans, making sense of the interplay of music and politics in the Soviet Union is not so easy. Whether we are politically sophisticated or only moderately interested in politics, we understand that the source of American political power resides in our constitution. The constitution defines the duties and powers of government and specifies which governmental bodies or offices have the authority to conduct specific governmental business. Political parties, in our system, came later; they have an unofficial but useful role in helping make our government more efficient and effective (usually). In the Soviet Union it was the other way around: the source of political power lay, not in the constitution, but in the Communist Party. The party itself established and defined the government. Political, social, and economic goals were achieved by appointed party officials, who by representing the Party were understood to represent all Soviet citizens.

Looking at the chaotic, war-torn, and economically devastated Soviet Union of 1917, we Americans might not expect that policies to regulate the arts would have a very high priority; but in fact, they did. Soviet officials believed that the arts in capitalist countries suffered greatly because they had no relationship to the nation’s social and political goals. They also believed that the arts would
play an important role in achieving these goals in the Soviet Union. Why this should be is the subject of today’s class session.

**LENIN PIC**
The story of arts in the Soviet era begins, quite naturally, with Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, alias Lenin, a revolutionary thinker and political theorist. Lenin led the successful revolution of 1917 that established the Soviet Union as a socialist state governed by the Communist Party. He defined the role of the party in regulating the arts with these words:

**LENIN ON THE ARTS**

> Art belongs to the people ... Every artist, everyone who considers himself an artist, has the right to create freely according to his ideal, independently of everything. However, we are Communists, and we must not stand with folded hands and let chaos develop as it pleases. We must systemically guide this process and form its result.

**STALIN PIC**
If Lenin’s role was to define the broad goals of the Soviet state, Joseph Stalin’s role was to implement the practical policies that would achieve them. From 1922 until his death in 1953 Stalin was head of both the Party and the Government.

Stalin’s strong interest in classical music led him to become personally involved in the enforcement of policies designed to regulate music. During the years 1934 to 1939, he implemented “the Great Terror,” a period of widespread political “cleansing” during which many artists and musicians were imprisoned, exiled or executed as “enemies of the Soviet state.” The English historian Robert Conquest, who wrote the definitive book on this aspect of Stalin’s rule, created this clever limerick to contrast Stalin’s role with that of Lenin:

> There was an old bastard named Lenin
> Who did two or three million men in.
> That’s a lot to have done in
> But where he did one in
> That old bastard Stalin did ten in.

**ZHDANOV PIC**
The third major figure in the Party’s oversight of the arts was Andrei Zhdanov, a close confidante of Stalin and for many years considered the future leader of the Party and government. As long-time Director of Cultural Policy he rigorously enforced Social Realism by targeting composers whose music he considered “formalist,” that is, too complex, dissonant, or abstract to appeal to common people. Many leading composers of the day, including Prokofiev, Khacha-
turian, and Shostakovich, felt the sting of Zhdanov’s biting critiques and severe punishments, which included loss of teaching and conducting positions, cancellation of publishing contracts, banning of public performances and shunning by other musicians.

ABOUT SOCIALIST REALISM

SOCIALIST REALISM
Lenin’s vague statement, “Art belongs to the people,” was understood to mean that the arts should:

- be accessible to, and understandable by, the people
- instill pride in their nation and its history
- inspire them to achieve the economic, political and social goals of the Soviet state.

Over a period of a dozen years, roughly from 1918 to 1930, Soviet officials developed a set of policies designed to achieve these goals. The policies themselves, and type of art that resulted from them, are called “Socialist Realism.” Soviet officials understood that the ultimate success of the policy would depend on the participation of artists themselves - the writers, architects, dancers, poets, playwrights, and musicians - to accept the policies and critique the artistic output of fellow artists. In return for making this effort the state would support Soviet artists in a manner far superior to that of Western nations. As we will see, this required a huge effort, undertaken over many years.

SOCIAL REALISM TIMELINE
Like governmental policies in all nations, Socialist Realism was applied in different ways at different times, and with different degrees of enforcement.

- In 1917 the Communist Party began immediately to define the role of the arts in the Soviet state. During this period of transition Western ideas of modern art still flourished in the arts. Thus in the 1920s Soviet composers were relatively free to create what they wished.

- By 1932 the policy of Social Realism was fully implemented throughout the Soviet Union. Especially after 1936, it was harshly enforced, often in music by Joseph Stalin personally, and composers were routinely rewarded or punished for their compliance or noncompliance with guidelines established by the Union of Soviet Composers.
• From 1941 through 1945 all governmental efforts were focused on defeating Nazi Germany in the “Great Patriotic War;” thus censorship of the arts was less strictly enforced.

• From 1947 until the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, the policy was once again strictly enforced, and composers who did not follow Socialist Realism guidelines were harshly punished.

• From 1954 on Socialist Realism remained in force but its guidelines were somewhat relaxed.

SOCIALIST REALISM GUIDELINES
That’s the story of Social Realism in general. For more details let’s look at the detailed guidelines published in 1934 by the Union of Soviet Composers:

The main attention of the Soviet composer must be directed towards the victorious progressive principles of reality, toward all that is heroic, bright, and beautiful. This distinguishes the spiritual world of Soviet man and must be embodied in musical images full of beauty and strength. Socialist Realism demands an implacable struggle against folk-negating modernistic directions that are typical of contemporary bourgeois art, and against the subservience and servility towards modern bourgeois culture.

SOVIET MUSIC SHOULD BE...
Here is a brief summary of the type of music that Soviet composers were expected to write. It should be:

• heroic, bright and beautiful
• understandable by common people
• patriotic, courageous, and energetic
• free from the decadent, self-indulgent influences of the West

KEY TERMS
• The term “formalism” referred to writing modernistic, complex, or dissonant music, in which “the selfish whims of the composer dominate rather than the desire to inspire the masses.” Prokofiev once quipped under his breath that “formalism is music that people don’t understand at first hearing.”
The term “bourgeois” meant “characteristic of the middle class in capitalist societies, especially its materialistic values and conventional attitudes.” In common practice “bourgeois” sometimes meant rich, bored, greedy, propertied, conventional, conservative, and conformist.

The term “proletariat” meant the great mass of workers or working-class people, regarded collectively. In common practice it referred to working-class people, wage earners, and the common people.

DOCUMENTARY FILM (24 min)
I’ve given you a link to an excellent short film, “Socialist Realism,” that shows how the policy was used in Soviet Russia, with examples drawn mostly from the visual arts.

SOCIALIST REALISM IN PRACTICE
Implementing the policies of Socialist Realism in a huge, culturally diverse nation required a complex bureaucracy, as well as the willing participation of Soviet composers themselves. The main elements of this bureaucracy were:

THE MINISTRY OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS
Overall responsibility for implementing Socialist Realism resided in the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, which appointed and supervised censors, supervised the Union of Soviet Composers, authorized or withheld musical performances, and managed a system of rewards and punishments.

AWARDS AND HONORS
To assist this process the Ministry created a series of awards to honor Soviet composers and specific compositions that met the goals of Socialist Realism. Examples of these include the Lenin Prize, the Stalin Prize, the USSR State Prize, the Glinka State Prize, the People’s Artist of the USSR, and the Hero of Socialist Labor. Soviet musicians and other artists wore these awards proudly and paid close attention to which awards, and how many, had been awarded to colleagues.

KHACHATURIAN AND HIS MEDALS

SHOSTAKOVICH AND HIS MEDALS

CRITICISM AND PUNISHMENT
The Ministry also censored and punished composers and specific compositions that did not meet the guidelines of Socialist Realism. To this end government censors attended musical events and filed reports on the quality of each piece with party officials. Punishments were meted out for nonconforming works and
including public criticism; loss of income from cancelled publishing contracts, cancellation of performances, and loss teaching positions.

**UNION OF SOVIET COMPOSERS**

As loyal members of the Party and privileged members of society, composers themselves were required to regulate their own artistic output. The Union of Soviet Composers created in 1932, operated through local and regional chapters. Composers themselves were authorized to provide or withhold financial support for fellow members, approve or disapprove the publication of new compositions, and review and critique individual compositions.

After an extended visit to the Soviet Union in 1962, the American musicologist Boris Schwartz described how the Union operated in these words:

> The true musical influence inside the Soviet Union is wielded by the composers. It is the Union of Soviet Composers that is the power behind all musical decisions of the Soviet government. It is an amazing power wielded by the small directorate of a professional union. The Composers’ Union can influence prizes, awards, commissions and publications. It can guide the repertoire of opera houses and orchestras, of radio and concert programs. The union can send its members abroad on special assignments. It also holds the purse strings through control of government funds for music and musicians.

> A young Soviet composer can rise only through the regular channels of the Union. First, his work might be played at a local survey of new music; then, if successful, recommended for performance at a national plenum in Moscow. But first of all he must please those in power - the older, established and (invariably) conservative composers. The Union can, and does, assist its loyal members in a variety of ways, from the copying of orchestral parts to a stay in a vacation home. In return for this bounty, the Union directorate demands absolute loyalty and conformity to the official cultural directives of the party. “Rebels” are unwelcome. The President of the Union is quoted as having said, “While a revolutionary can compose anything, that does not mean that he is necessarily entitled to the benefits of the Union of Composers.”

**MUSICAL EXAMPLES**

How did Soviet composers respond to the policy of Socialist Realism? Sometimes by writing pieces with strong patriotic and pro-Socialist themes, with titles like “Heroes of the Revolution,” “Of the Motherland,” or “Three Songs about Lenin.” Sometimes by writing music for films, a safe and lucrative occu-
pation. And very often, by trying to apply the guidelines to operas, ballets, symphonies or sonatas. This was far more difficult and more risky; and clearly, it was more difficult for some composers than for others. Let’s examine the fate of four well-known pieces.

The first of these is the Violin Concerto by Dmitri Kabalevsky, which we already heard. This is a highly approved example of Socialist Realism met all the guidelines of Socialist Realism: it is bright and beautiful, energetic and optimistic in mood and easy to understand, with singable melodies and simple harmonies. It also avoids the expression of personal or negative emotions, a trait often labelled decadent or self-indulgent by Soviet censors.

**REVIEW WITH “SHOULD BE” SLIDE**

**CRITICIZED: KHACHATURIAN, SYMPHONY NO. 3, 1947**

Khachaturian’s Symphony No. 3 was written in 1947 to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. It is a dramatic, somewhat bombastic symphony featuring an organ solo and fifteen trumpets: a veritable hymn of praise to the Soviet Union. Khachaturian, an enthusiastic Communist, wrote that he “wanted this work to express the Soviet people’s joy and pride in their great and mighty country.” But the work’s raw and strident style and unorthodox instrumentation displeased Soviet authorities; there was too much of Khachaturian’s own ego here for Soviet tastes.

Some musicologists believe that this music contained few, if any, of the objectionable traits found in the music of other composers. In retrospect, it was most likely Khachaturian’s role as President of the Union of Soviet Composers, perceived by the government as a bastion of politically incorrect music, and not his music as such, which earned him a place on the black list of 1948. A few months later Khachaturian made a full and humble public apology for his artistic “errors;” his musical style, however, did not change. As part of his punishment he was sent to his homeland of Armenia, and continued to be censored until December, 1948, when he was restored to favor and praised for his score for a film biography of Lenin.

**PLAY**

**DISCUSS WITH “SHOULD BE” SLIDE**

**BANNED: PROKOFIEV, PIANO SONATA NO. 6, 1940**

In 1939 – the 3rd year of Stalin’s “Great Terror” campaign, Prokofiev received an official request to compose a piece to celebrate Stalin’s sixtieth birthday. Deeply troubled by the imprisonment and death of several musician friends, Prokofiev instead began composing his Piano Sonata No. 6, a large-scale, four movement work of extreme technical difficulty. It was well received by the public and cen-
sors alike, and soon became part of the repertoire of the leading pianists of the day.

But in 1948, after Prokofiev was accused of Formalism, eight of his major works, including this piano sonata, were banned from being performed in the Soviet Union during the remainder of the composer’s lifetime.

We’re going to listen to the 4th movement, played by the young Chinese pianist, Yundi Li.

**PLAY**

**DISCUSS WITH “SHOULD BE” SLIDE**

**SUPPRESSED: SHOSTAKOVICH SYMPHONY NO. 4, 1936**
In composing his Fourth Symphony Shostakovich was very influenced by the music of Gustav Mahler. This gigantic symphony is more than an hour in length, uses a huge orchestra, and is full of Mahler-like melodies.

In the spring of 1936, after rehearsals of the Fourth Symphony were well under way, the orchestra cancelled the performance at the request of the Union of Soviet Composers. Shostakovich withdrew the piece voluntarily, after an article entitled “Muddle Instead of Music,” strongly condemning his music, appeared in Pravda, the Communist Party newspaper. The Fourth Symphony was not published or performed until 25 years later, after the death of Joseph Stalin.

**PLAY**

**DISCUSS WITH “SHOULD BE” SLIDE**

**SHOSTAKOVICH, SYMPHONY NO. 5, 1937**
In response to this public criticism Shostakovich tried again. His Fifth Symphony was more conservative and more heroic in nature than any of his earlier works. In an interview shortly before its first performance Shostakovich described the new piece as "a Soviet artist's creative response to just criticism."

At its premier in 1937, the Fifth Symphony was a phenomenal success. It drove many members of the audience to tears and overwhelming emotion. Music critics and the authorities alike agreed that he had learned from his mistakes and had become a true Soviet artist. Composer Dmitry Kabalevsky, who had disassociated himself from Shostakovich when the Pravda article was published, praised the Fifth Symphony and congratulated Shostakovich for "not having given in to the seductive temptations of your previous 'erroneous' ways.”

**PLAY**
DISCUSS WITH “SHOULD BE” SLIDE